



Collage by HEMANT BHATNAGAR

New Media Change U.S. Politics

By THOMAS B. EDSALL

The World Wide Web and the accompanying explosion in "new media" have forced an upheaval in U.S. politics in at least four areas: creating innovative ways to reach voters; a radically changed news system; an unprecedented flood of small donors; and newly empowered interest groups on the left and the right.

At the most visible level, several presidential candidates kicked off their official campaigns in 2007 by announcing their intentions on the Internet, a radical departure from the tradition of making such declarations before local crowds, usually in contenders' hometowns.

New technologies and their savviest users are leaving their stamp on many U.S. election campaigns—exposing candidate gaffes, boosting fundraising and reshaping the news cycle.

Democratic Senator Hillary Clinton, for example, used a Web video to announce the formation of her presidential exploratory committee—a major news event—using footage of herself sitting on a couch in her living room in Chappaqua, New York.

“Let’s talk. Let’s chat. Let’s start a dialogue about your ideas and mine,” Clinton told viewers. “And while I can’t visit everyone’s living room, I can try. And with a little help from modern technology, I’ll be holding live online video chats this week, starting Monday. So let the conversation begin.”

The advantages for the candidate are substantial. Unlike a public event, with the press asking questions, a Web announcement is completely under the control of the campaign; it can be filmed over and over again until it is flawless, at the same time conveying a sense of intimacy and spontaneity.

Pitfalls and possibilities

Many of the other technological advances that underpin the new media are not so advantageous to campaigns. Indeed, they have created a whole new set of potential pitfalls.

Whenever they appear in any public venue, candidates are now subject to constant observation by the staff and supporters of their opponents, equipped with small, easy-to-use digital cameras and tape recorders.

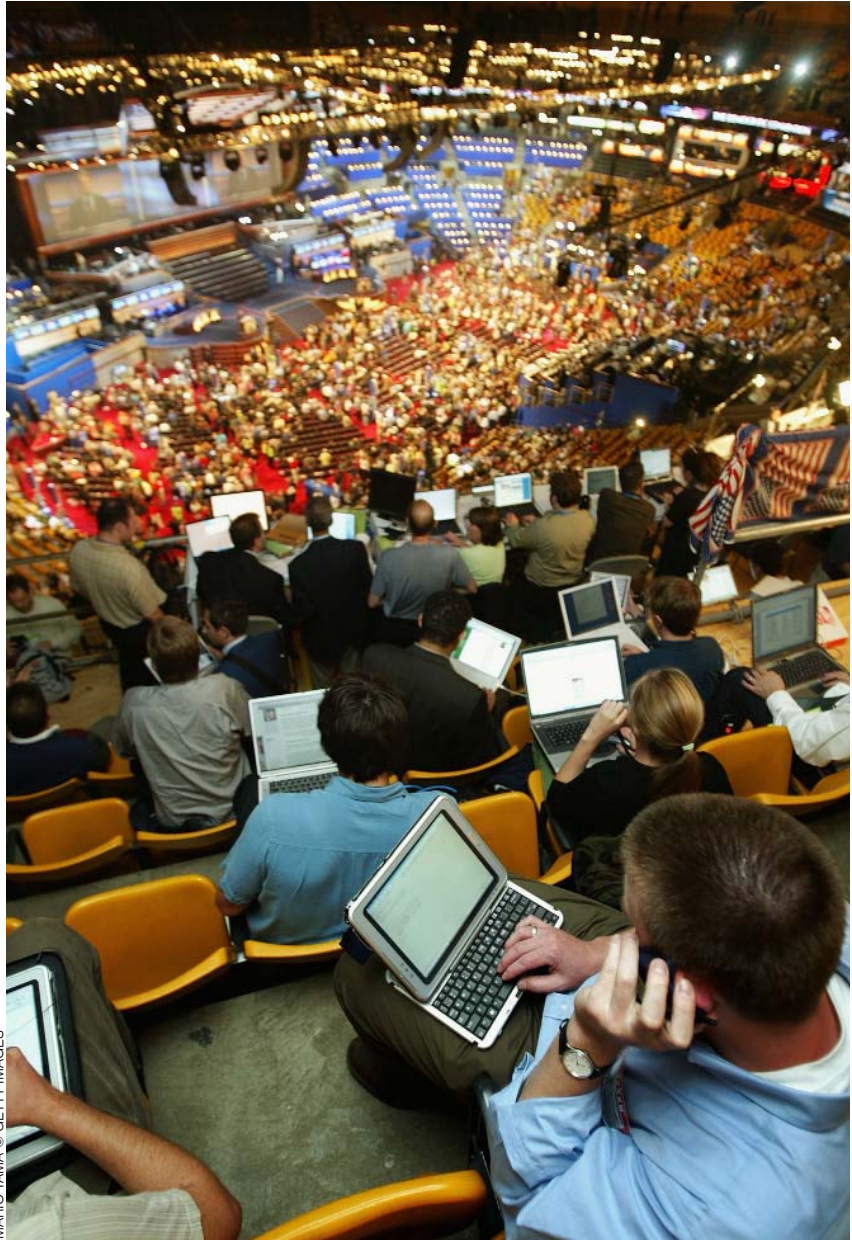
In 2006, Republican Senator George Allen of Virginia, who was heavily favored to be reelected, ultimately lost to Democrat James Webb. Allen’s campaign was irreparably damaged after he ridiculed a Webb staffer of Indian origin filming him: “This fellow here, over here with the yellow shirt, *macaca*, or whatever his name is. He’s with my opponent. He’s following us around everywhere....Let’s give a welcome to *macaca*, here. Welcome to America and the real world of Virginia.” In some European cultures, *macaca* is a derogatory term used against African immigrants.

The so-called *macaca* footage became a major campaign event, viewed hundreds of thousands of times on YouTube, the publicly accessible video Web site, and played repeatedly on local and national television.

One presidential candidate who benefited in a big way from the new Web technology is Republican Representative Ron Paul of Texas. While a long shot at best in his bid for the 2008 Republican nomination for President, Paul’s libertarian principles won him a large following on the Web, where he was highly popular at such sites as MySpace and YouTube.

For Paul, the Web paid off handsomely, helping him to raise \$5.3 million in the third quarter of 2007, almost as much as Senator John McCain, now the Republican nominee, who collected \$5.7 million during the same period.

Three other unprecedented uses of the new media have already affected the 2008 presidential election. In one, an aide to the campaign of Democratic nominee Senator Barack Obama—working unofficially—took an Apple Computer advertisement that likened the dominant role of Microsoft to the dictatorial government



Internet bloggers post updates for their readers during the 2004 Democratic National Convention in Boston, Massachusetts.

described in George Orwell’s novel *1984* and converted that ad into one portraying Hillary Clinton as an all-powerful dictator.

The Obama campaign disassociated itself from the ad and the aide resigned, but the pseudo-commercial was viewed close to a million times on YouTube, much to Clinton’s discomfort.

Obama, in turn, was embarrassed by an independently made video, posted on YouTube, known as *Obama Girl*. In it, actress-model Amber Lee Ettinger lip-synched a song, *I Got a Crush ... on Obama*, as she danced seductively.

The video did far less damage to the Obama campaign than a secretly taped film sequence—also put up on YouTube—of Democratic presidential candidate John Edwards getting made up before a television appearance. To the music and lyrics of a song from the musical *West Side Story*, Edwards is shown

For more information:

The Internet and the 2008 election

http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/252/report_display.asp

Does the Internet matter in election politics?

http://www.readwriteweb.com/archives/web_20_election.php

repeatedly combing and fluffing his hair. The lyrics to the song used as background music are, “*I feel pretty, oh so pretty, oh so pretty and witty tonight...*”

The broad Internet distribution of such film footage was not technologically feasible in 2004.

Lower-profile effects

At the same time, there have been a series of more subtle and less visible developments stemming from the expansion of new media capabilities. These include:

- The Internet has become the vehicle for the mobilization of the antiwar left as an influential Democratic interest group that all candidates and congressional leaders now must treat with respect and special deference.

- Such Web sites as OpenLeft, Eschaton and DailyKos, along with a host of bloggers who file reports to these and other sites, make up a constituency that Democratic candidates seek not to offend. Instead, many of the candidates and their top staffers hold regular conference calls with the left blogosphere community and seek as favorable coverage as possible.

- Democratic presidential candidate Howard Dean’s success in 2004 in raising large sums of money from small donors through Web-based credit card links has now been replicated by all the major 2008 Democratic candidates and, to a lesser but still significant extent, by the Republican candidates. One consequence has been to vastly enlarge the number of small donors and to lower the average size of contributions. For Obama, particularly, this trend made a long-shot candidacy viable by a relative newcomer to national politics.

- For Democrats, and Democratic Party committees, the surge in small Web-based donors contributed significantly to the leveling of the financial playing field in 2004 and even more gains in the current (2007-2008) cycle. For the first time in at least three decades, Democrats generally maintained a substantial financial advantage over the Republicans, the party that traditionally has been able to tap deeper financial resources for campaign funding.

- Web-based political sites are coming of age and, in many respects, becoming as or more important than newspapers. Politico, The Huffington Post, Salon and Slate have, in just a few years, become key players in the coverage of elections and of policy making.

- The Huffington Post, as an example—where I am currently participating in the development of political coverage—in many respects replicates the full range of content that printed newspapers offer, with a national and foreign news “front page,” as well as a political page, a media page and entertainment and living sections. An advantage of online media entities is the new technological capacity to seamlessly hyperlink to literally thousands of other news sources, ranging from the online versions of “old media” resources—such as *The New York Times* (www.nytimes.com), *The Washington Post* (www.washingtonpost.com), the Los Angeles Times (www.latimes.com), and so forth—as well as to large num-

bers of conservative and progressive “blogrolls” that, in turn, connect viewers to politically varied sites, such as RealClearPolitics, TalkingPointsMemo, Instapundit, Taegan Goddard’s PoliticalWire and the Drudge Report.

- In 2000, campaigns dealt with a consistent news cycle geared to television news shows aired from 6 to 7 p.m. and newspaper deadlines between 9 and 11 p.m. Now, managers of Web sites are on constant lookout for new developments, and a major political event at 2 p.m. has, by the time of the evening television news, already produced multiple rounds of Internet reaction and criticism from competitors and analysts.

- The emergence of left, right and neutral Web sites has created an instant sounding board for widespread reaction to the shifting fortunes of political campaigns. At presidential debates, for



GINA GAYLE © AP/WIDEWORLD

From their perch in Central Park, New York City, Margie Lempert (left) and Jennifer Warren try to motivate registered Democrats in Ohio, 900 kilometers away, to vote.

example, campaign staffers are constantly searching for comments posted on the Internet praising the performance of their candidate and criticizing that of others. Those comments, in turn, are immediately e-mailed out as news releases to both mainstream, or old, media online, or to new media journalists and other commentators covering the debate.

The speed of change in the current political environment, resulting from ground-breaking communications and information technologies, is, if past trends are a guide, going to accelerate, suggesting that the 2008 campaign innovations are a modest precursor to radical transformation in 2012 and 2016.



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